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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the ways to assess learner achievement in history. Standardized tests are used frequently by states to measure learner achievement. There are many weaknesses inherent in using standardized tests to measure student achievement in history, especially the fact that the test may not be valid for the local classroom since the test writers do not know what the students have actually studied. Some of the weakness of standardized tests are remedied by the use of criterion-referenced tests. The objectives for instruction have been developed and written, usually on the state level, and the criterion-referenced tests are aligned with these statements of intent. Adequate time must be given to develop the tests and the objectives. Portfolios are another possible approach to assessing student achievement in history. Portfolios give the student the opportunity to demonstrate personal achievement. Some examples are given of possible portfolio approaches. Performance objectives are recommended by many educators, and some examples are provided of objectives appropriate for history assessment. Whatever the standards used to assess student achievement, the focal point should always be the learner and achieving optimal learning. (SLD)

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Assessment In the History Curriculum

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ASSESSMENT IN THE HISTORY CURRICULUM

Assessment of student progress is a key concept being emphasized by educators presently, history achievement being no exception. History teacher should have an eager desire to know how well students are doing in the curriculum. Here, the history teacher may also gauge the effectiveness of his/her teaching.

There are a plethora of ways to use to assess learner achievement. Selected approaches will be discussed in terms of strengths and weaknesses.

Standardized Tests and History Achievement

Standardized tests are used rather frequently by different states to measure learner achievement. There need to be an a adequate number of multiple choice test items on a standardized test to ascertain the scope of student progress. Selected tests may not have ample multiple choice test items to truly measure what a student has accomplished in history. Thus, the scope or breadth of content tested is vital to ensure adequacy in determining learner progress. The manual section of the standardized test used needs to explain how validity was determined. Also, the manual should explain approaches used in ascertaining reliability be it split/half, test/retest, and/or alternate forms.
An additional vital item to be studied in the manual is how the test was standardized (Ediger, 1999, 233-240).

There are numerous weaknesses inherent in using standardized tests to measure student achievement in history. Among others, these include the following:

1. the test items may not be valid for the local classroom since test writers do not know what the the students have studied in the classroom.
2. the test items may have been written at too complex or too easy a level for a selected grade level of students taking the test.
3. the test may not measure consistently to make for an accurate statement of student achievement.
4. the test is written by writers external to the local classroom and have no relationships with any student. Thus, students become objects to be measured for achievement in history rather than as persons having worth and value.
5. all criteria for testing are objective such as the same directions given for all who take the test, the same time length for taking the entire test, as well as the same scoring key used for machine scoring. Students, however, are individuals with feelings and individual differences (Ediger, 1999, Chapter Fifteen).

Too frequently, test items pertaining to history measure the

lowest level of cognition such as factual recall. The following is an example of measuring factual knowledge on the part of the student:

The first permanent settlement in the New World was
a) Plymouth Rock
b) Jamestown
c) Massachusetts Bay
d) Connecticut.

There definitely are salient facts for students to learn . Higher levels of cognition, however, need to be emphasized in teaching and learning in history. The next level stresses comprehension in leaning: Write in your own words what is meant by a town meeting in New England.

Next in complexity is the level of application or use that a student makes from what has been learned: Why do nations in the world have colonies? Here, the student can make use of the concept colonies which was just studied.

Going up the ladder in complexity of cognition is critical thinking. Here, the learner separates facts from opinions, fantasy from reality, and accurate from inaccurate ideas: What were the differences between Plymouth rock and Massachusetts Bay Colonies?

After analysis, such as in critical thinking, the learner needs to be able put together or synthesize: Write an essay on how the Puritan religion affected thinking in Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The last and, perhaps, the highest level of cognition is evaluation. Here, the student appraises the worth of a product or process: From the essay written pertaining to synthesis above, develop appropriate criteria and appraise the quality of the written product (See Bloom,1971).

It is relatively easy to see how factual knowledge is quite appropriate to measure when using multiple choice items on a standardized test. It is very difficult to write multiple choice test items to measure that which is more complex than factual knowledge. Multiple choice test items are used in standardized tests since they lend themselves well to machine scoring. No state could do all the mandated testing if it were not for computerized scoring of thousands of student tests.

This does not rule out the use of standardized tests. These tests can definitely be improved upon to the point of measuring higher levels of cognition. Clarity of test items, appropriate validity, and quality reliability are further goals for standardized tests to meet (Ediger, 1997, 190). .

Basically, there are no objectives for teachers to use which match with the test items on standardized tests. This weakness has been remedied by the use of criterion referenced testing (CRTs).

Criterion Referenced Tests (CRTs)

CRTs are generally written on the state level and mandated to be administered in the public schools. The objectives for instruction have been developed and written on the state level. The CRTs are aligned with these statements of intent. Thus, validity is in evidence in harmonizing the objectives with the CRT. However, the assumption here is that adequate time be given to develop the objectives and CRTs carefully. Carelessly written objectives and test items can only do harm to the instructional process. Pilot studies should be conducted of the CRTs too make sure that the language therein is clear and readable. The tests should be on the understanding level of the test taker. Making tests too easy or too difficult to pass benefits no one. Questions which may be raised pertaining to CRTs are the following:

1. will the test items be prone to examine student knowledge of specifics rather than broader ideas in the history curriculum?
2. will there be balance in the curriculum whereby an adequate number of test items pertain to history? Too many test items may relate to measuring student achievement in science and mathematics to the near exclusion of history.
3. will the test items in history emphasize relevant subject matter, rather than unrelated trivia?
4. will the scope and sequence of test items in history be broad enough to assess an adequate span of historical time?
5. will the test items be developmentally appropriate for those involved in taking the test?

When multiple choice test items are used in testing, another kind of assessment technique should also be used such as essay items. Multiple choice test items tend to measure specific kinds of information, such as in the following example:

The Balfour Declaration was stated by Great Britain in

a) 1907
b) 1917
c) 1927
d) 1937.

Which of the following is not a capitol city in the Middle East?

a) Cairo
b) Damascus
c) Amman
d) Asuncion.

When using essay test items, students may engage more thoroughly in critical thinking, as compared to multiple choice test items, such as in the following:

1. Contrast and compare how the Arab nations versus the Jews viewed the Balfour Declaration of 1917.
2. Select two capitol cities of the Middle East and state their individual roles in vital events today pertaining to the Middle East.

Measuring specifics is important in history which involves a study of time in human events; however, the goals of students should be set higher to encompass higher levels of cognition such as critical thinking. Portfolios would more likely indicate a student's personal achievement in history as compared to the sole use of multiple choice test items. The student with teacher guidance may then select items such as the following for an inclusive portfolio:

1. written work, such as causes for the 1967 six day war between Israel versus Egypt, Syria, and Jordan.
2. art work, such as desert regions, oasis, mountainous areas, and sources for water (Sea of Galilee, Jordan River, Dead Sea, Nile River, and the Tigris-Euphrates).
3. dioramas to show a bedouin village, a modern house, a street scene in a capitol city, and a mosque/synagogue. Any item too large for a portfolio may be shown in snapshot form.
4. a construction activity whereby the following are possibilities for students individually or within a committee: a paper mache' model of a map of the Middle East; a card board box, among other art media, used to make a model of the wall around old Jerusalem, the Dome of the Rock, the Western Wall of the ancient Jewish temple, and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.
5. a video tape of committee participation by the learner, including planning for a series of bulletin board displays, a creative dramatics presentation, a formal dramatizations, a reader's theater, and a mime. The topics might include Great Britain receiving the Mandate for governing Palestine in 1922 from the League of Nations, the Mac Mahen-Hussein Correspondence of 1915 which promised the land of Palestine to the Arabs living in the Holy Land, and the French Mandate to govern Syria and Lebanon in 1922 from the League of Nations.
6. cassette recordings of oral work completed. An oral report may be made on the late King Hussein and the present King Abdullah of Jordan, President Hosni Mubarek of Egypt, Prime Minister Ehud Barak of Israel, and the late Hafez Assad, president of Syria (See Ediger, 1998, 52 pp).

Performance Objectives in History

Performance objectives are recommended by numerous educators. These objectives are stated in terms of what students are to do. They could be incorporated into state mandated objectives as well as district wide objectives for students to attain. if students are to do a history journal, the following entrees seem significant in terms of performance objectives for student attainment:

1. entries are dated when written into the journal.
2. major historical concepts are explained in depth, such as the Koran and the Torah.
3. drawings in the journal indicate thought and deliberation, such as a drawing of the interior of a mosque or synagogue.
4. time lines are clear and important items contained therein are clearly identified, such as the birth of Mohammed in 570 AD as the beginning of the Moslem religion, and Moses in 1300 BC, approximately, in issuing the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai for Judaism.
5. major generalizations are written in complete sentences and using correct grammar.
6. questions written indicate higher levels of cognition such as in critical and creative thinking as well as in problem solving.
7. interesting information is located on internet and other reference sources, such as content on the Intafada, strife between opposing sides, mass demonstrations, the invasion of Lebanon in 1982-1985, refugee camps of the Palestinians, and building of new Jewish settlements on Arab lands.
8. goals listed to engage in further exploration such as the Oslo Accords of 1993, and United Nations Resolutions of 242 and 338.

Each of the above enumerated items provides ways for students to show what has been learned in terms of performance. Performance objectives need to be clearly written. They show what students are to learn. Rubrics with a five point Likert Scale should be used to evaluate each product and process of the learner. For each of the five levels of the Likert Scale, students may notice what is desired in terms of performance to achieve at any one of the designated levels. By spelling out what is required to reach any one level on the Likert Scale, students may notice what is involved to achieve therein.

Whichever standards are used to assess student achievement, the focal point should always be on the learner to assist him/her to achieve as optimally as possible (Ediger, 1998, 52 pp).

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